

Issue and Debate

Outlook on Deploying of the MX Mobile Missile

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 14 — In early September, President Carter made what many military and foreign policy officials believe was the most important decision affecting American strategic nuclear forces in a decade. He approved a Defense Department proposal to build a force of 200 mobile intercontinental missiles, known as the MX, that would be placed aboard a fleet of huge launcher vehicles designed to roam around the American Southwest.

The decision to endorse the Pentagon's \$33 billion plan was not an easy one, and White House aides acknowledge that, before Mr. Carter's action, the proposal for the mobile missile system had aroused an intense, year-long controversy within the Administration. Mr. Carter's primary aim in finally approving the MX, officials report, was to lessen the possibility that the Soviet Union, in the coming decade, could achieve the ability to destroy American land-based missiles in a "first-strike" nuclear attack.

However, it is clear that Mr. Carter's decision was also guided by a desire to win the support of Senate conservatives for the proposed strategic arms treaty with Moscow.

While the debate within the Administration over whether to proceed has come to an end, a wider controversy, involving the Congress and many non-Governmental experts on strategic issues, is only now getting under way. But pressures are building for Mr. Carter to reverse or modify his September decision.

Some critics of the MX contend that the Administration's plan for the missile is so costly and complex that it will never be built. Other opponents are worried that if the MX is deployed, it could undermine the stability of the American-Soviet nuclear balance. So far, the Administration has responded to these criticisms by stressing that it

is committed to moving ahead with its existing plan for the weapon.

The Background

In addition to long-range bombers and submarine-launched missiles, the United States, since the 1960's, has deployed a force of 1,054 land-based rockets in concrete underground silos. While the rockets have remained impervious to attack for 15 years, military analysts have continually worried that Moscow's deployment of highly accurate missiles could alter this. There is now a consensus in military circles that a new generation of missiles being introduced by the Soviet Union will give Moscow the ability to threaten American land-based missiles with destruction in the early 1980's.

In recent years, strategic experts have debated a number of alternatives for coping with the vulnerability of land-based missiles. Proponents of arms control suggest that the United States should abandon land-based rockets and place more reliance on bombers and strategic submarines. This course has been resisted, however, by the Air Force and by many Pentagon civilians who argue that American bombers and submarines could also become vulnerable at some point to Soviet attack.

Instead, the Air Force late last year asked Mr. Carter to approve a plan for protecting land-based missiles from a Soviet strike by shunting them among thousands of empty silos. The Air Force also urged the White House to authorize development of a new missile, the MX, that, for the first time, would give Washington the ability to threaten large numbers of Soviet land-based rockets.

In late May, Mr. Carter approved the Air Force's request for 200 MX missiles, each with 10 highly accurate warheads. But he objected to the idea of hiding the missiles among empty silos because he feared that it would complicate the monitoring of future arms control accords.

Finally, in September, Mr. Carter approved a modified approach to basing the missiles, known as the "race track." In this plan, each of the 200 new missiles would be hauled around separate circular roadways to be built in southern Nevada and Utah. In the event of a Soviet attack, the large vehicles carrying the missiles could be driven into any one of 23 concrete shelters on each roadway and launched. In this way, it is contended, Moscow would be able to count but not precisely locate each of the MX missiles.

For Revising Decision

Critics of the MX "race track" contend that the proposed system will be far too expensive and is unlikely to provide the degree of protection for American missiles desired by the Air Force. Some opponents also believe that construction of the missile roadways will pose serious environmental problems in the Southwest.

For example, Sidney Drell, a Stanford University scientist who has advised several administrations on strategic matters, recently called the Air Force's proposed basing system a "Rube Goldberg scheme." At a meeting of the Arms Control Association, a private, prodisarmament group in Washington, Mr. Drell argued that Moscow could threaten the MX in the coming decade by simply adding warheads to existing missiles so that it could attack every shelter around each MX "race track."

Rather than deploying the "race track," Mr. Drell and several other experts have suggested that MX missile be put on a new generation of small submarines that would patrol in waters off the country's East and West Coasts. Unlike the Navy's existing, long-range missile submarines, the coastal vessels would not be nuclear-powered and, according to Mr. Drell, they would be cheaper and cause less environmental disruption than the land-based "race track."

Another alternative would be for the United States to protect its existing force of land-based rockets by deploying anti-ballistic-missiles weapons, or ABM's. Although Moscow and Washington in 1972 agreed to severe limits on antimissile weapons, Steven P. Rosen, a researcher at Harvard University, has said that the treaty should be amended to allow both parties to defend their existing rocket forces with ABM's.

A third group of critics is not opposed to the "race track" basing design, but believes that the missile itself is much too lethal. These experts argue that by giving the United States the ability to destroy Soviet missiles, Moscow would be inevitably led to build a mobile system of its own, a step that would pose grave obstacles for Washington in verifying new arms agreements.

Against Revising Decision

Proponents of the Administration's "race track" proposal maintain that it is superior in almost every respect to the alternatives suggested by outside experts. Noting that the "race track" would be deployed in remote and sparsely populated areas of Utah and Nevada, Pentagon aides contend that a new fleet of coastal submarines would be far more damaging to the environment.

MX advocates argue that a new fleet would also be more vulnerable than the "race track." They contend that communications with the submarines could be disrupted and that Moscow, by detonating nuclear explosions in coastal waters, could destroy most small missile boats.

While many Pentagon aides favor a revival of the country's antimissile program, most believe that this is not politically feasible in the near future. Deploying ABM's to defend land-based missiles would require new negotiations with Moscow and this step, defense aides indicate, would probably be resisted by the Soviet Government as well as arm control advocates in the American Government.

MX proponents concede that less costly and elaborate schemes exist for basing a mobile missile than the "race-track." But they insist that all of these alternatives would create verification difficulties for arms control. By spending extra money to insure that Moscow would be able to count American missiles, it is suggested that Washington is setting an example that the Soviet Union might follow if and when it decides to deploy a mobile rocket of its own.

The Outlook

Although the Administration is asking Congress this year for more than \$1 billion to begin work on the MX, the first of the 200 missiles would not be deployed until 1986. Thus, there is plenty of time for the MX decision to be thoroughly examined and perhaps altered.

However, the Administration is unlikely to review its plans for the MX in the near future. Mr. Carter urgently needs the support of conservatives on Capitol Hill for the arms treaty with Moscow and many pro-military senators are skeptical of Mr. Carter's commitment to proceeding with the MX. As a result, any sign that the Administration was reassessing its MX decision would be viewed by suspicious senators as a move to cancel the project.

In the longer term, several developments could lead Mr. Carter or a new President to reverse the MX decision. Technical problems in building the system would lead to excess costs that, in turn, could prompt Congress to cancel the weapon. Alternatively, Moscow, in future arms talks, might agree to limit its ability to threaten existing American missiles, making the MX program unnecessary.